

CITY OF NEWARK, NJ'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Lemora Means , August 31, 1995, conducted by Mageline E. Little

Q: Your name?

Means: Lemora Means.

Q: And your date of birth?

Means: September the tenth, 1896.

Q: Wonderful. And where were you born Mrs. Means?

Means: Stromberg County, South Carolina.

Q: Carolina. When you were working or you did work, what was your primary occupation?

Means: I was a nurse.

Q: Oh very good. Did you have a secondary occupation or hobby you were involved in?

Means: Yes. I was parlor maid in a gambling house in Saratoga Springs, New York, for twenty summers.

Q: Oh yes. I remember about Saratoga. How we used to get the good jobs there.

Means: Yes. Yes.

Q: How far did you go in school?

Means: Through the twelfth grade.

Q: Oh, you're a high school graduate. That was great for those years. That's like a college education.

Means: That was Lincoln Academy, Kings Mountain, South Carolina.

Q: Yes. Kings Mountain. That's Ashville, somewhere.

Means: No. That's, well, Kings Mountain, we'd come out from, coming from Stromberg to Charlotte.

Q: Charlotte.

Means: Yes.

Q: Looking at my map.

Means: Yes. Yeah.

Q: Who did you marry and when?

Means: Fred Means. When we get married honey?

Mr. Means: I don't know.

Means: February the eighth, 18--.

Mr. Means: No, 19--, it would have to be 19 something.

Means: Nineteen, oh I don't know.

Q: All right. If it comes back, we'll. [cross talk] And where did you meet your husband?

Means: Well, we were born in the same community. Yeah.

Q: Did you both live in that community?

Means: Yes. We were both born in that community.

Q: And what kind of work did your husband do?

Means: He was a farmer.

Q: Names of your children. First born?

Means: Fred.

Q: Okay, Fred. And where was he born?

Means: He was, where were you born?

Mr. Means: In South Carolina.

Q: Are there other children?

Means: No.

Q: The only child. Do you remember your father's name?

Means: No.

Q: How about your mother?

Means: Yes. Cora Tucker.

Q: Cora Tucker. So you are Mrs. Means.

Means: Yes.

Q: You have any idea where she was born?

Means: Yes. She was born around Stromberg County.

Q: Okay, the whole family. Are there some uncles and aunts that you remember?

Means: Yeah, well, let's see.

Q: Just wanted, we're going to be coming back to ask you such questions as how many came to this area or you know that kind of thing. That's the only reason that question was asked.

Means: Oh, none of them came.

Q: Now your name has been the same all these years?

Means: Yeah.

Q: Since you married Mr. Fred Means, Sr. What religious faith are you?

Means: Baptist.

Q: You're a Baptist. And a member of a church in Newark?

Means: Mt. Zion.

Q: Yes. I heard you are a founding member of that congregation. Now we talk about leaving South Carolina, coming to Newark. Do you remember when you first, even decided, to leave South Carolina?

Means: Oh, no because for many years I worked in Saratoga Springs and in St. Petersburg, Florida in the winter. Went from place to place. Even after Fred was born we did that.

Q: Your reason for moving at all was to find work.

Means: Yes.

Q: There were winters in Florida and summers in New York.

Means: That's right. The races in Saratoga. For twenty years we did that.

Q: Oh yes. You know I heard about that and sort of thought about it as a way of making it during the summer. I know some of my classmates did that. Now, but you don't remember your given age. Do you have an idea about what brought you to Newark? What were the circumstances?

Means: What happened?

Mr. Means: Your mother died.

Means: Yeah.

Mr. Means: She had been keeping me while you.

Means: Oh we settled, that's why we settled in Newark. Yes. Yes. To make a home for him. Because see we went from Florida to New York State and my mother lived in Stromberg County, South Carolina. When he was nine years old my mother past and then we had to take care of him.

Q: Anything you remember about Newark that brought you here, that you settled for Newark and not New York State. Is there some relatives or?

Means: Yes. I had a sister-in-law who lived here.

Q: Sister-in-law. That's interesting.

Means: Her husband was on the police force here.

Q: Because the question is did you know someone in Newark before coming.

Means: Yes. Yes.

Q: So it was your sister-in-law. Can you remember anything she might have told you about the city that she lived in? What image did she give you?

Means: Oh, that it was a good place to live. You could get lives.

Mr., Means: Jobs.

Q: I was about to say work, that you could get work.



Means: Yes.

Q: Do you remember how you traveled? How did you travel from Florida?

Means: In a car. We drove.

Q: Oh you drove from Florida. So you were.

Means: We drove from Florida in the winter, and Saratoga., We went from St. Petersburg, Florida to Saratoga. We made it, twenty years we did that.

Q: Oh fantastic. Did we decide about when you arrived in Newark to stay?

Means: Oh yes.

Q: Fred will figure that out for us.

Mr. Means: She can't remember.

Q: You said nine years old. So.

Mr. Means: It was during World War II.

Q: Was it? [cross talk] Can you remember anything about the journey? Had you visited the city?

Means: Oh yes. Yes. I had visited here.

Q: Do you remember anything about the conditions of people, you know, like you, African-Americans?

Means: Yes.

Q: Did they look like they were?

Means: Yeah. My brother-in-law was an officer in the Presbyterian Church around, over there. And my sister-in-law Leah. He was on the police force too. And they lived on, where did they?

Mr. Means: Wicker Street.

Means: And he was an officer of that Presbyterian, picture's in my mind. I can't think now. The Presbyterian Church.

Mr. Means: Where it's on the corner of Fifteenth Avenue?

Means: Yes.

Q: Fifteenth Avenue. Yes. Yes. I had.

Mr. Means: Well, maybe it's Thirteenth Avenue. I guess Thirteenth Avenue.

Means: Yeah, that is Thirteenth Avenue.

Q: Did you get to visit home often? When I say home, the south?

Means: No. We didn't go home often. No.

Q: Oh that's right because your mother had passed.

Means: Yes.



Q: So, you probably settled in Newark and this was home?

Means: Yes.

Q: Oh good. And the first place you lived? Was that the Wadsworth area, the Thirteenth.

Mr. Means: No. As a matter of fact, she first went to Saratoga Springs, New York, cause it was in the summertime so you were working there. And after the season was over, we came back, really to East Orange first.

Means: Yes we did.

Mr. Means: Yes we did. East Orange first because the [?] was in East Orange. And so never did go to Philadelphia before he started.

Means: No. When he started I was thinking about John's, which house it had been. Right at the school. I called picture. We'd get off the bus because that's the cemetery. We'd get off the bus here.

Mr. Means: On Central Avenue.

Q: On Central Avenue, Hollywood Avenue.

Means: Yeah. Yeah. And we'd get off the bus there, and we'd get off going down to Ninth Avenue there.

Mr. Means: But before that, you went to Philadelphia though because little Hannah adopted a daughter, Tommie, and Tommie lived in Philadelphia, so we went there for a short time but it didn't work out. Then we came to East Orange. Then from East Orange to Newark.

Q: Okay. First in Newark. Were you in an apartment building, multi-family house?

Means: No a three.

Q: A three family. Multi-family house.

Mr. Means: Two and a half. 216 Sherman Avenue. It was a two and a half family house.

Q: 216 Sherman Avenue.

Means: That's where we lived.

Q: I want that on the record. Were there any businesses and factories near you? Or was it strictly residential? Was there, Sherman Avenue, did they have, you know, little stores or?

Means: Sears, Roebuck was right in front of us. Yeah. And we would get.

Q: Oh yes, yes. We're talking about in the 40s now?

Mr. Means: Yeah. There were factories around there.

Q: Any people, Afro-Americans, do you remember them having any businesses where you lived? Even maybe a drive cleaners or a store, anybody that you visited or remember? You want to include the businesses, you know, in that area. About how long did you live in the Sherman Avenue address whatever, well, we can't worry about exactly, but in that neighborhood.

Means: We didn't stay there long.

Mr. Means: It probably was maybe three years, something like that.

Q: Three years. All right. What was, in the three years, what was the racial, the ethnic make up? Were there more blacks than whites?

Means: Yes. Most all of them were black.

Mr. Means: No. Wait. On Sherman Avenue?

Means: No. Oh not Sherman Avenue. My mind is up with bigbridlingg on Elizabeth Road.

Mr. Means: It was about twenty to twenty-five percent black in that area.

Means: Oh, we were right back of Sears, Roebuck Store.

Q: Yeah. I know that area. Yes. All right now, your second move, you know neighborhoods, we're talking about neighborhoods now. You're moving Sherman Avenue and you're moving to what area of the city?

Means: Oh, we went from Sherman Avenue, to where I made the, the apartment. Yes. Here. Right here.

Q: To Ridgewood Avenue.

Means: Ridgewood Avenue. That's right.

Q: When you moved to this area, was it a mixed neighborhood.

Means: Slightly mixed. Wasn't it.

Mr. Means: We were the third black family on this block.

Q: But it was predominantly?

Mr. Means: White.

Q: I mean, but ethnic wise.

Mr. Means: Mostly Jews.

Q: Do you remember anything about what you did for recreation, what happened in your neighborhood or the foods in your neighborhood? And I can imagine you moved here because there was a good school in the neighborhood.

Means: We moved here because I had made a deposit on this house, and that's why we moved here from Sherman Avenue.

Q: But you were looking for a good neighborhood?

Means: Yeah. See we were renting on Sherman Avenue.

Mr. Means: And I didn't have to change schools. See I was in Middle Street School.

Means: That's right. And still went up here. That's right.

Q: Okay. Anything about living in Newark, and this is the later 40s, right, we're talking about? That you remember. Anything about the government? Anything that you can think of that sticks in your mind. And I'm sure you remember the Irving Turner Blvd. era. You might want to tell us about what it was to be a part of the politician that. Did you know him?

Mr. Means: Yeah. Irving Turner. Well, we didn't know him well. I knew him.

Q: Okay. Just trying to find out if there was something that was going on that sort of stand out in your mind about living in Newark. Were there things you did? Did you take the children to Wickwake Park for recreation or a place to go.

Mr. Means: Sure. Yeah. I went to Wickwake Park.

Q: Picnics and anything about the city that, grandma, you remember.

Means: I don't remember.

Q: Yes you do. You just have to, it takes a little time to pull it up.

Means: Pull it up. Yeah.

Mr. Means: Lemora you remember when you worked in ODB during the war.

Means: Oh yes. Sure.

Q: Tell me what that is.

Means: That's Office of Defense Benefit.

Q: Oh your worked for the Office of Defense.

Means: Yeah. Before they moved from Newark.

Q: I didn't know they were here.

Means: Yes, honey, yes. They had rented from, rented back of the store, Bamberger's store, and

you come out the side street, and that's where the Office of Defense, the department that I got all with. A lot of us worked in there.

Q: Oh, that's interesting.

Means: Yeah. And they moved that to, we worked there until the government transferred that office from Newark. We had good jobs. All negroes had good jobs.

Q: Oh, that's interesting. You weren't?

Means: No. No.

Q: But at least it was a good job. And a lot of them had transferred here from Washington. You know, that group, had transferred here from Washington.

Mr. Means: It was during the war.

Q: Did your husband work there too?

Means: No, what did my husband do?

Q: No. Okay. I just wanted to. But you were there.

Means: Yes. No, I was there. No he never.

Mr. Means: He worked as a bartender.

Means: Yeah. I tell you, he was a bartender, had what they called the Harvard Lincoln, they had



a club, the Harvard Lincoln.

Mr. Means: The alumni house. And also the bridge club.

Q: So he was a part of, very much a part of the social at the same time. Repeat that club, now, the first one. I know about the bridge. What was that other?

Mr. Means: The alumni house.

Q: The alumni house.

Means: Yeah. That was the Harvard Lincoln Alumni Club.

Q: The Harvard Lincoln. So you just told me the occupation of your husband and your occupation. I'm looking at my list. You wouldn't by chance, do you save a lot of things. You wouldn't have a picture of the building you worked or anything like that? I'm just asking that because we're going to be looking for photographs, a uniform, or anything of that nature that people might have. There's a legal side of this. They give it to. I mean, they give you a legal document to say that you're donating or you're lending an artifact. So if you happen to come across something, I'll be back in a year, don't worry about that. Because.

Means: I'll be here.

Q: Do you remember anything about the people who served the city, like the police, the fire fighters, social workers? Do you recall any stories about them? Maybe, do you know the first African-American social worker? Or you know any of those kind of things, remember any kind of the things like that.

Means: No.

Q: Did you do most of your shopping downtown?

Means: Oh yes.

Q: What were the best stores?

Means: Bamberger's. Hanes. Well, we were by ourselves. We didn't have money, you know, we were working. We did Hanes occasionally. And there's another store between Hanes and, I've forgotten now, for women's clothes.

Q: Ohrbach's.

Means: Yeah. I remember Ohrbach's. Oh yes, I remember when they were left here, they went out. Oh we missed them too. Because we could go in from the Main Avenue to the side street.

Q: Do you remember any racial discrimination? Did you experience? Anybody stop you at the door, or?

Means: No. No. Never had that.

Q: Or go for a job and didn't get it.

Means: No. Never had that experience here.

Q: This is one of our questions. Who is the Mayor of Springfield Avenue? Who was considered? Must have been a black man who had businesses on Springfield and they considered him the mayor of the avenue. I've heard a name, but I haven't been able to. Do you remember a Dr. William Ashby. Or Meyer Ellingstein?

Means: No.

Mr. Means: Yeah. He was the mayor at one point. Yeah, and Ashby, William Ashby was the very influential man during the time, and was often.

Q: He was a social worker really. Right. You were just so self-sufficient, you didn't have to be bothered with those folk. Moving now to institutions that you might have been involved in. The first question is what church do you belong?

Means: Mt. Zion. I joined Mt. Zion. That's the first church I joined after I came here.

Mr. Means: That was the one that was on Thomas Street. They call that the First Baptist Church. Then they had a split, and they went up to the Mt. Zion Church that we belong to now is up on Broadway. But when we first joined, it was.

Means: It was on Thomas Street. The other church.

Mr. Means; On Thomas Street.

Q: So you just told me the history of your church. First it was on Thomas Street and now you're up on Broadway. And your pastor's Reverend Sewett. Okay. What organizations in your church are you involved? Because you are still.

Means: Well, right now I'm not working in any of them.

Q: But you are, your name is.

Means: Oh, well, for a long time I was president of the Ladies Aide.

Q: Right. Aren't you one of the first? Isn't she a first trustee?

Means: I was the first woman trustee.

Q: First woman trustee. That's very important.

Means: Yeah. I was on that list of the first women trustees.

Q: Yes. I heard that from one of your senior members. You are.

Means: They appointed us in the back of that white building there.

Mr. Means: That was Reverend Suffolk did that right? Yeah Reverend Suffolk. It wasn't Reverend Herst.

Means: No.

Q: So you played a real role in the organization of your church?

Means: Oh yes. Yes.

Q: You've seen ministers come and you've seen them go.

Means: That's right.

Q: But you remember Reverend Tucker very well.

Means: Yes. I used to follow. You'd know I was there because he was my carriage daddy. And I used to when they accepted us, my church, Billy EPA and I were going to the white association

which was in Irvington. And I was elected delegate from the church because everybody else worked, and I was the only person, well was the only person to go. And I started that in our neighborhood. I was always. [cross talk] Go to associations in other towns.

Mr. Means: The American Baptists. Is that the group?

Means: Okay. That's another group.

Q: All right. American Baptists. Okay.

Means: I know when the American Baptists accepted Mt. Zion as a member. See. Yes. It was in one of the churches that now stands in Irvington.

Q: They have an office in East Orange now.

Means: Up the hill, up the hill. Yes.

Q: So it seems like you were a great member in that particular organization in your church.

Means: Yeah.

Q: Are there any organizations in your neighborhood that you were a part of?

Means: No. No.

Mr. Means: Yes there were. You worked out here in the 60s when they had all of the, those monies that came in. You worked with this block, on this Block Association, with Ridgewood Avenue Block Association. You gave out, had food and lunch for the kids.

Means: Yes. Yes.

Q: So you did work on your block association to improve it?

Means: Yes. Yes.

Q: Oh I can understand how you're still here cause you worked to save it.

Means: At that time we didn't live here, my sister-in-law, his sister, lived on. What street there?

Q: On Wicker Street.

Mr. Means: They were on Wicker Street. But we were here.

Means: But I mean when we were in town, working in here and everything. We lived in her house, going back and forth into her house, instead of waiting at home.

Mr. Means: No. We lived here. We lived here. Lived here since probably 1940, must have been 44.

Means: Oh I know the date. I remember the day I lived here, and closed the deal. Down the hill here somewhere, and made the last payment.

Mr. Means: At Robert Treet Savings.

Means: Yeah. Robert Treet Savings.

Mr. Means: That's where you had your mortgage.

Means: That's right.

Q: So, at least, you know, you got a mortgage.

Mr. Means: Yeah. Five thousand some odd for the house during that time.

Q: Lots of money then, right?

Means: Yes. It was.

Q: All right. Let's see if you, a little bit about education in Newark. What did you think of the schools in the 40s and 50s?

Means: They were wonderful.

Q: You knew that your child could get a good education.

Means: Yes. Yes.

Q: And you felt that he would be treated as a human being.

Means: Oh yes. See my brother-in-law lived on Wicker Street and he was on the police force. Yeah.

Q: Your brother was on the police?

Means: My brother-in-law.

Q: Yeah, brother-in-law. [cross talk] Oh John Dinkins, on the police force. And we're talking



about the 40s. Oh good.

Means: He was a great member in the Presbyterian Church up there. Oh yeah. He was a Presbyterian.

Q: Oh, that's your brother-in-law. Oh, so at least we know that your family was of a civil servants, and there were blacks on the police force.

Means: See, we came here right after Rayford Means came back you know. And he was a cousin of theirs. And we know all about that. Oh yeah.

Q: Oh, yes. So your in-laws, you had some in-laws that were ministers. Reverend Rayford.

Mr. Means: Rayford was probably a cousin of mine.

Q: Cousin.

Mr. Means: That came out of South Carolina.

Q: Did he come before you did?

Means: Yes. Oh yes. Not long.

Q: So he migrated?

Means: Yeah.

Q: Are there any celebrations that stand out in your mind that were germane to African-Americans? Anything in Newark that you remember they did annually or have become. Fred is

working on a date for us. All right, let's leave that.

Mr. Means: Most of it had to do with church. That was the main involvement during that time in terms of cultural and religious groups.

Q: She just gave us that. Okay. Now, the last part of our questions and we might have to go over some. Do you recall anything about Louise Scott?

Means: I can only remember Scott's name. I can't raise a thing around her.

Mr. Means: Yeah, well, she was a beautician. She built that, went into that Ballantine.

Q: Krueger.

Mr. Means: She was one, I guess one of the first, if not the first black millionaire. Lemora didn't know her that well.

Means: No, but. Yes.

Q: Did you know anything about the city and its breweries? Anybody who might have worked for the beer company? Nobody in your family, right?

Means: No.

Q: Okay.

Mr. Means: They discriminated. Those beer companies discriminated a whole lot back there. Because being in sixties, when I was involved with CORE, that's when we began to break down that discrimination in the breweries.

Q: So you're telling me that this Mr. Krueger didn't necessarily hire black folks in his brewery. I mean, you know.

Mr. Means: Yeah. It was Krueger, Ballantine, Pabst. You know there were a number of breweries here. No, they didn't have any good history of hiring black folks during that time. No. It wasn't until the 60s, the Civil Rights Movement, that that began to change. Right.

Q: And how, was changed to what organization. I mean what.

Mr. Means: CORE, NAACP, Urban League.

Q: Those two. Oh. So there were three organizations who were working --

Mr. Means: Played different roles.

Q: -- to improve the lifestyle of African-Americans and get them jobs.

Mr. Means: Right.

Q: All right, mom, the last question, and yeah, we still have some tape there. How would you sum up, you know, your life in the city? You know, you would say it's. What would you say about having lived in the city a long part of your life?

Means: I think I've, considering the condition we were in when we came here, I think we've been quite successful. And I don't know.

Q: I think you just said it. You know, you made the best of the situation.

Mr. Means: Well you remember when I wanted to go to NYU and we didn't have any money,

what did you do?

Means: I don't remember.

Mr. Means: Yes, you do. You went out and decided to go to NYU in 53, and we didn't have enough money for me to go. You weren't working at the time, but then what did you do?

Means: I don't remember.

Mr. Means: Remember working in that laundry.

Means: Oh, I worked in Lincoln Laundry. Yeah. Yeah, I did. Seventy-five cents a day, wasn't it?

Q: That's important too.

Means: So he could go.

Mr. Means: Well, that becomes important in terms of family support. The only way I was able to go to NYU was that, I didn't have enough money, so everybody in the family was trying to contribute for me to go to NYU. And even with all that, I went two years and didn't have enough. And had waived my draft rights and went in the Army. And when I came back, I had the GI Bill.

Q: Oh yeah. A fate of history where the war helped us eventually.

Means: We didn't have anything, but I always knew my child had to go to school, you know. Yeah, I came from South Carolina knowing that. Because you see, I had finished 1917 Trinity College and rode on the train in the afternoon, with some tickets in my hand, just fanning, sitting up there, serving, fanning with that certificate.

Mr. Means: That was for the nursing training.

Q: Oh that's interesting. Even in those days how precious it was. Right? Now you're really beginning to talk. I love when she talks from the heart. That's the thing that how important. We're going to give this message to some other folks. We hope. That education is important. Well, this has been interesting. Is there anything else?

Means: In the afternoon. I had to sit up there. They just lined us up with the sun shining in our faces, down.

Mr. Means: Well another one of her characteristics is the way she treated her mother Cora. And matter of fact, probably one of the reasons that I take care of her the way I do, because of the way she took care of Cora.

Means: We lived in a milltown, southern milltown. And we always got along with white doctors. But my mother had smallpox and they didn't know what it was. And they.

END OF INTERVIEW